



MEG DODS: A STUDY IN SCOTT'S PREOCCUPATION WITH THE GLORIOUS PAST.

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Abstract

The present study intends to explore *St. Ronan's Well* as a novel where Scott, who is loth to abandon his attachment and loyalties to the valuable past, begins the book expanding on the love of the golden past with its set of values that find expression in the character of Meg Dods. The study argues that Scott has modeled this unique character of Meg Dods with the specific aim of illustrating the long lost values of the past that still rule the heart of a gentleman and an artist that Scott was. This study will thus focus only on a single character, ultimately proving the statement that Scott is preoccupied with the glorious past from which, try as hard as he can, is unable to break away.

Key Words

Meg Dods; Ronan's Well; Walter Scott; Preoccupation;Glorious;Past.

Sir Walter Scott¹ whose contribution to the development of the historical novel went a long way in establishing him as an artist of great repute, propelled him to occupy a seat next only to great men of letters like Shakespeare. To Scott goes the credit of developing and refining the art of endowing prosaic pieces of chronicle with the magic of imagination and fantasy. The journey of Scott from *The lay of the Last Minstrel*² to *St. Ronan's well*³, a long voyage of 13 years of struggle and triumph, from a poet to a matured novelist, is certainly an interesting journey of the unveiling of the novelist hidden behind the poet. Whatever Scott took up for composition, he never rested till he worked a great perfection into it. History for Scott was the

clay with which he modelled the great castles of his varied narratives that tell of stories of long gone days, with the subtlety and close observation of the consummate storyteller. To have read Scott closely is to have enjoyed the daintiest of dishes, well served and well-garnished and made to a perfect finish. Scott's love for the past is closely knit with his belief in values of yore, wherein reigns a sense of discipline, honesty, chivalry, scholarship and a life of good sense and decency. Scott in that sense was a man of elegance and sophistication, attributes rarely to be observed among men of letters.

What puts apart *St. Ronan's Well* from the rest of Scott's work as a novelist is the contrast that Scott utilizes to bring to forefront the values that he stood for throughout his life. "and one reads with blank amazement the assertion that a gathering of literary men once by secret ballot unanimously voted "*St. Ronan's Well*" the best of the Waverley Novels." (Jenks, 1906, p.217)

In *St. Ronan's Well* the old world of chivalry, simplicity and romance is brought into juxtaposition with the world that is progressive and upcoming, with its follies and drawbacks. The story takes place in the Southern part of Scotland; and it gradually turns out to be a tale of the rivalry between Valentine Bulmer, the Earl of Etherington, and his half-brother Francis Tyrrel.

Scott takes up the characters of three individuals to illustrate his love for values of the past; the first one is that of Meg Dods the hostess of the inn called Cleikum, the second is that of Frank Tyrrel the artist who comes to stay at her old inn, and the third that of Clara Mowbray, the sister of the owner of the Fox hotel John Mowbray- who also happens to be the heir of the Laird Mowbray of Shaw's Castle. However, the present study is all set to focus only on the character of Meg Dods as the connoisseur of the golden past.

The study of Meg Dods is a study in black and white, a deep dive into the remote past with its strong loyalties and values that stand the test of time. A look at Meg Dods is to have a peep into the life of the Grand Dames of fairy tales who with their understanding, good sense, generosity and good taste are remembered for their mouth watering recipes as well as for the fairy yarns that they wove to entertain children. Meg Dods, the owner of the Cleikum inn, is the first character that we come across in *St. Ronan's Well*. "One of Scott's most diverting eccentric virtuosi of the spoken word is Meg Dods, the inn-keeper in *St. Ronan's Well*." (Mayhead, 1968, p.16)

Cleikum inn came into existence as the outcome of the mansion of the Mowbray's being deserted on the death of the Laird Lawrence; and later on the place was sold to the parents of Meg; and Lucky Dods naturally came to be the heiress to possess the mansion since her parents did not have a male issue. "So that

Meg Dods ,when she succeeded to her parents,was a considerable heiress, and,as such, had the honour of refusing three topping farmers , two bonnet lairds,and a horse couper,who successfully made proposals to us.” (Scott, 1824, p.15/16)

Meg brooked no interference in her affairs on any ground whatsoever; and she ruled with a high hand not only the man servants and maids but also the traveller who chanced to drop at her inn and was in need of victuals and lodgings for a few nights. The good fare and room would be provided to a traveller in her own manner and choice; and if by chance the traveller demurred on any account whatsoever, he was immediately asked to leave and find shelter elsewhere. Looking for lodgings away from Cleikum inn would be like going another 16 miles; and if the weather was inclement it would be the worst nightmare for the traveller ;and in such a situation the inconvenienced traveller would ask pardon from Meg and get food and shelter for the night. The high handedness of Meg was a boon in disguise since it always paid in the long run and it was meant for the welfare of all concerned.This is precisely what Scott himself observes: “It is but justice to Meg Dods to state, that though hers was a severe and almost despotic government, it could not be termed a tyranny, since it was exercised, upon the whole, for the good of the subject.” (Scott,1824,p.17)

The wine cellars belonging to Meg boasted of a variety of wines that were not to be had even for money a hundred miles around. The only difficulty a customer faced was to convince her of the type of wine he wanted; and, moreover, if Meg discovered that an individual had had enough wine already she would forbid giving him any further wine. Meg was very particular about this and she did not like folk in a complete state of inebriation while they were still occupants of her inn. Meg was really proud of her kitchen since she personally supervised most of the cooking there; and there were certain dishes that she herself prepared without allowing the interference of even the best cooks. “Such were the cock-a-leeky, and the savoury minced collops, which rivalled in their way even the veal cutlets of our old friend Mrs. Hall, at Ferrybridge.” (Scott,1824,p.17) Meg’s bed linen, table linen and other cloth were homespun and of the best quality; and she inspected these from time to time to ascertain that all the linen was freshly laid and was spotless. Such was the personal care that Meg invested in the daily necessities of the customer who would be around with so much expectation; and so she made it her point to keep up her reputation as a Lady of high standards in cleanliness and culinary expertise.

Considering the amount of care Meg took for the preparation of the dishes and the upkeep of the linen in her inn, the money she charged towards the board and lodging of the customers was a mere paltry sum. When the customer had had his fill and was about to leave the worthy precincts of Meg's inn, he would be naturally concerned of the amount that he would be shelling out for his consumption at the table. Meg would then appear with the bill that would read; "A shilling for breakfast, three shillings for dinner, including a pint of old port, eighteenpence for a snug supper..." (Scott, 1824, p.18) Having heard Meg he would heave a sigh of relief and thanking Meg in his heart of hearts, would pay her and be off merrily. Such was the truth practiced in times of yore and such is the glorious past that Scott looks back to with a lot of nostalgia. Francis Russell Hart has the greatest regard for Meg Dods and therefore he writes: "Meg Dods begins and ends in the same conception of fidelity. She is doggedly loyal, like Meg Merrilies, to a threatened way of life, deplores the disloyalty to that way in a powerful house to which she has also been loyal, and seeks to save the exponents of that way from its destroyers." (Hart, 1966, p.268)

Cleikum's inn suffered the same neglect and decay that the village experienced; and the shifting away of the highway from the place where the inn was located came as a great shock and inconvenience to Meg who suffered great loss of business and for this she blamed the younger generation for being so unthinking and unkind for all that she had been doing for them in the form of her services. Her complaint about this was expressed in the statement: "Their fathers," she said, "wad not have done the like of it to a lone woman." (Scott, 1824, p.19)

Meg Dods was a noble soul and her appearance has been described by Scott very vividly and is memorable:

She had hair of a brindled colour, betwixt black and grey, which was apt to escape in elf-locks from under her mutch when she was thrown into violent agitation—long skinny hands, terminated by stout talons—grey eyes, thin lips, a robust person, a broad, though flat chest, capital wind, and a voice that could match a choir of fishwomen. She was accustomed to say of herself in her more gentle moods, that her bark was worse than her bite; but what teeth could have matched a tongue, which, when in full career, is vouched to have been heard from the Kirk to the Castle of Saint Ronan's? (Scott, 1824, p.20)

Meg Dods was an Invictus or an individual who ever considered herself unvanquished; and so Meg who would rather give up her ghost than give up the care and upkeep of her inn even though it had started to lose its once brilliant look and popularity as an inn of great repute. She would never care for the opinion of people who suggested that she might as well take down the sign post and retire from public life as her inn was going the way of oblivion and decay. "But Meg's spirit scorned submission, direct or implied. "Her father's door," she said, "should be open to the road, till her father's bairn should be streekit and carried out at it with her feet foremost".(Scott,1824,p.22)

What is even more surprising is the enthusiasm of Meg to compete with the latest addition to the inns at the village; the latest being the fox which she referred to as a hottle. She is ready to take on any challenge thrown to her by the gentry running the hottle and this is what she observes:" "They may hottle that likes; but they shall see that Lucky Dods⁴ an hottle on as lang as the best of them." (Scott,1824,p.22) Fortunately for Meg, though the reputation of her Cleikum inn had declined of late, but the price of her land had gone up considerably and that was a great satisfaction to the keeper.

Meg now decided to cut down on all the extra expenses that were siphoning away even the little that she was able to earn in the state of the present decay that the inn was thrown into. She shut half the windows of the Cleikum inn to confuse the tax-gatherer, reduced her furniture, "pensioned off the humpbacked postilion" (Scott,1824,p.23) Finally to comfort herself that she was still in the fray and that all was not lost she asked Dick Tinto⁵ the celebrated painter to repaint the signboard that had lost its brilliant display on account of being exposed to bad weather throughout the year.

Even though things were not looking up for Meg Dods,even then there were some persons who still patronised her; and they were known by the name of the "members of the Killnakelty Hunt"(Scott,1824,p.24) They would come in silence riding their horses, would sing their songs, crack a few jokes, have their dinner in silence and go away paying a handsome amount to Meg Dods.

Another set of persons who were in the habit of visiting the Cleikum inn were "a set of ancient brethren of the angle from Edinburgh"(Scott,1824,p.24) and these individuals visited Meg during the spring and summer; and surprisingly they were the only persons who were allowed a lot of freedom that wasn't normally permitted by Meg.They were again quite reasonable in their behaviour towards Meg; they had their porridge laced with a little brandy at the inn; the day they spent out on the heather hunting and eating their meat; and in the evening they would return bringing with them attractive trouts which Meg would then

prepare for dinner; later, before going to bed they would have their ale and punch and finally retire to bed after singing and offering a God bless you to all.

Yet another group of youngsters came to the Cleikum from the city allured by the popularity of Meg, who they had heard was known for the variety of wine that she boasted of in her old cellar. “The excellence of her liquor and the cheapness of her reckonings”(Scott,1824,p.25) brought them to the Cleikum inn and they stayed on for long enjoying the sweet hospitality of the Old Dame. These men were the members of the Wildfire club; and they had made themselves comfortable at the inn to get over the worries and anxieties of everyday life.

These enthusiastic youngsters created a lot of commotion at the Cleikum; and they would try various ways in which to please Meg to get the best of liquor for enjoyment; at certain times Meg would be unduly harsh with them and sometimes even assault them physically if they demanded wine more than for fit for their consumption. However, being jolly by nature these youngsters would not mind Meg’s wild behaviour which they would call “pretty Fanny’s way” (Scott,1824,p.26)

Meg always welcomed such travellers who came to her inn directly and who were in dire need of boarding and lodging; she, on the other hand, drove away such individuals who, for want of room at the Fox hotel at St.Ronan’s came to her inn pretending to be inclined towards her hospitality.

In conclusion to the praise of the Cleikum inn run by Lucky Dods, worthy reports from all quarters came in to the effect that it immensely pleased the old heart of Meg to discover that people applauded her Cleikum inn “as the neatest and most comfortable old-fashioned house in Scotland,where you had good attendance, and good cheer, at moderate rates.”(Scott,1824,p.28)

Notes

1. Sir Walter Scott was the first literary man of a great riding, sporting and fighting clan. Walter Scott, the ninth of twelve children, of whom the first six died in early childhood, was born in Edinburgh, on the fifteenth of August 1771. (Hutton, 1887, p.1,9)
2. *The Lay of the Last Minstrel* was Sir Walter Scott's first long narrative poem to be published in the year 1805.
3. *St. Ronan's Well*, a novel of Sir Walter Scott's mature years as an artist, was published in the year 1823.
4. The names Lucy Dods and Meg Dods refer to the same individual in the novel *St. Ronan's Well*.
5. Dick Tinto is the celebrated painter who appears in many of the novels of Sir Walter Scott, particularly in *The Bride of Lammermoor* where he is used by Scott to introduce and build the narrative considering it an inspiration from the observance of one of the paintings of the said artist.

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